

## Miami's Election Rejection

Written by Erik Bojnansky, BT Senior Writer; Photos by Silvia Ros  
October 2019

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### **The city's District 2 is waterfront, rich, powerful, and cursed**

**Why would anyone want to be Miami City Commissioner for District 2? The voters who put you in office one day are out to get you the next.**



Miami, with 471,000 residents, is often assumed to be the most populous city in Florida. It is not. That distinction goes to Jacksonville, with its 892,000 people.

Of course, Jacksonville is the largest city, by area, in the contiguous United States. Miami may rank No. 2 in population, but its residents are packed together much more densely.

Miami is also far more diverse than Jacksonville or any other big city in Florida. According to census data from 2016, Hispanics account for 73.6 percent of city residents. Blacks come in at 13.3 percent, with Anglos (non-Hispanic whites) trailing at 11.7 percent.

Those demographics are reflected in the city's elected officials. The mayor, Francis Suarez, is Hispanic. Of the five city commissioners, three are Hispanic, one is black, and one is white.

Those five commissioners are elected by districts whose geographic boundaries generally mirror the city's racial demographics. One of those districts, however, stands out for its concentration of wealth and power. That is District 2, which hugs Biscayne Bay from the city's southern border with Coral Gables northward through Coconut Grove, Brickell, downtown, the Venetian islands, and on up to NE 61st Street in the Upper Eastside.

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District 2, with about 116,000 residents, is by far the richest and most influential in the city. One example: The district is estimated to contribute more tax revenue to the city than all the other districts combined.

It is also the whitest -- by far.



While Anglos represent less than 12 percent of the city's overall population, they constitute 41.2 percent of District 2's residents, according to a recent analysis by the Miami-Dade County Elections Department.

The district's current commissioner is Ken Russell, who is 46 years old. He was a political neophyte who wasn't involved in city politics (he didn't even vote in local elections) until he led a fight to clean up an arsenic-contaminated city park in his south Coconut Grove neighborhood.

At the time, Russell's representative on the city commission was Marc Sarnoff, who had reached his two-term limit in office. Russell was feeling frustrated by the fact that Sarnoff's wife, Teresa, was running to succeed her husband. By most accounts, she was the leading candidate, drawing on her husband's name recognition and deep pool of wealthy donors.

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So Russell jumped into the race and, to the surprise of many, emerged victorious in November 2015.

Today Russell is chairman of the Miami City Commission, and counts Mayor Suarez as an ally. "I think he cares about the people he represents," Suarez says. "He puts the people first."

Nearing the end of his four-year term, Russell is running for re-election on the slogan "Let's Finish What We Started." If he wants to stay in office, he will need all the help he can get from those people he puts first.

Russell says he has wide support throughout District 2, though it isn't hard to find discontent among residents and stakeholders in the district.

"Ken is a smart, energetic guy, but he has not made everyone happy, and that's part of the game," says Marcelo Fernandes, chairman of the Coconut Grove Village Council, an elected body that advocates for issues affecting the Grove. "But I just think that you have to look at the results," Fernandes continues. "He's the incumbent. What has he done in four years?"

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~~Robertson, who has been a vocal critic of the city's leadership, said he was not a candidate for the position. He is a former mayor of Miami and a member of the city council. He has been a vocal critic of the city's leadership and has been a vocal critic of the city's leadership. He has been a vocal critic of the city's leadership.~~  
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